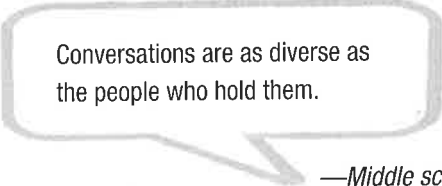


Chapter 10

Academic Conversation Assessment



Conversations are as diverse as the people who hold them.

—Middle school teacher

Consider how much you can learn about people from your conversations with them. Likewise, we can learn a lot about our students from their conversations. Conversations can show us what students have learned, how they actually use what they have learned, and their abilities to work and negotiate meaning with others. Conversations show us students' communication behaviors, higher-order thinking skills, academic language proficiency, and content understandings. They often provide a better window into students' thinking than written work or tests.

Conversations can complement a wide variety of other assessments, such as projects, lab reports, persuasive essays, presentations, and research reports, to name a few. One of the goals of assessment is to show students' knowledge and skills, as much as possible, in discipline-realistic situations. Multiple assessments help to "triangulate" the data, making what is learned about a student's learning much more valid than just looking at one score on one type of assessment. Another goal of assessment is to teach—with the assessment, not just before it. Conversations can do both—assess and teach at the same time.

You might have heard of the man who lost his watch at the end of an alley. A friend walked by and saw him looking for the watch on the corner where the streetlamp was. He asked the man, "Why are you looking over here? I thought you lost it down the alley." The man responds, "I did, but the light is much better over here." In our case, the "watch" is priceless: our students learning. Yet many systems tend to look for it as cheaply and conveniently as possible. It is vital that we keep looking in the right place, not just where it is convenient. Like looking for a priceless watch in a dark alley, assessing oral language and thinking is a big challenge for several reasons. First, a conversation is highly influenced by what a partner says. Because it is unrehearsed, the wide range of comments can send a conversation in different directions, some productive and some unproductive. One clever question at the right time, for example, can trigger a great conversation.

Preassessment of Academic Conversation Skills

In the beginning of the year it is important to assess students' conversation skills in order to know where to start. You can use a checklist or rubric from this or other chapters and provide some basic prompts. Preassessment also helps to show students that talk is important in your classroom, both as a tool for learning and for showing learning. These preassessment survey questions might be helpful as well:

- » How have you learned from talking with another person?
- » What skills are important when talking with another person?
- » What conversation skills would you like to work on this year?
- » What problems can come up when talking with others?
- » What would you like to converse about this year?

No Surprises: Alignment of Objectives, Assessment, and Instruction

"No surprises!" is our motto for encouraging a continual push for alignment of objectives, assessments, and instruction. Students should never be surprised by the prompts on an assessment. This means that the teaching must prepare them for success on it. Nor should students ever be surprised by their scores on an assessment. And when looking at an assessment, we should not be surprised by a list of objectives it is supposed to assess. If we are observing instruction, we should not be surprised by the assessment that will be given. And if we have an assessment in front of us, we shouldn't be surprised by the instruction we observe. In other words, it should all line up. In order to align conversation objectives, assessment, and instruction, we use the chart in Figure 10.1.

Conversation Assessment Challenges

Conversations are highly unpredictable. A seemingly poor prompt or response might eventually spark a profound conversation, or vice versa. You can never know all the alternative paths a conversation could have taken, or might still take. Consider Figure 10.2. The partner who prompts listens to whatever came before, and she decides that Prompt B is the best prompt at that moment. Another person might have chosen D, F, or A. The responder hears Prompt B and decides that the best response is W. If he had chosen a different response, such as S, the conversation would have taken a very different path. Answers are seldom clearly right or wrong.

Figure 10.1 Alignment of Conversation Objectives, Assessment, and Instruction

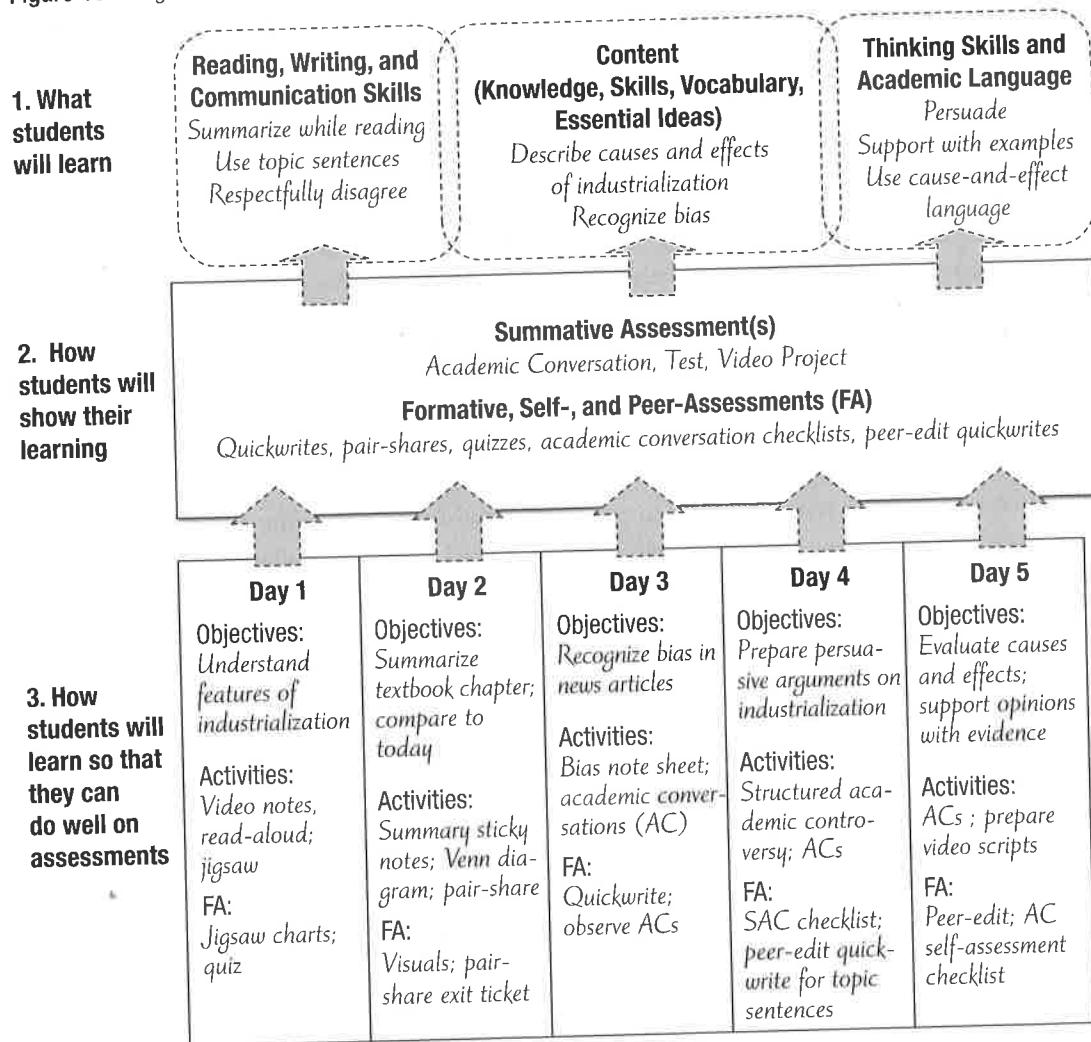
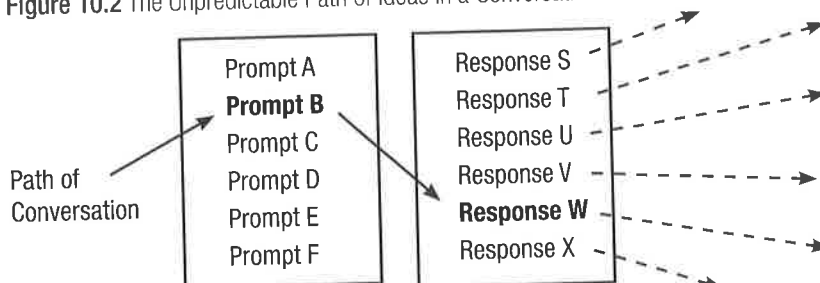


Figure 10.2 The Unpredictable Path of Ideas in a Conversation



The “path” or structure of a conversation greatly depends on the two individuals. As Mercer and Littleton argue:

Speakers will not usually know in advance exactly what they are going to say. A conversational interaction depends on the participants having some knowledge in common, that they can take for granted: the basis of common knowledge upon which their shared understanding depends is constantly being developed as they interact. The nature of the shared, contextualizing knowledge being invoked in any dialogue is therefore potentially quite complex. (2007, 121)

In other words, conversations are moving targets, morphing all the time. This being the case, we must figure out ways to assess what we want to assess, despite the variations.

A second challenge of assessing a conversation is the subjectivity of conversation and of analyzing it to assign values. Unlike short-answer and multiple-choice tests, in conversations there are no clear-cut right or wrong answers to count up. How do we “score” the quality of a thought-provoking question at the right time? How do we “score” appropriate silence and keep-talking tactics (e.g., *Uh huh, I see, Go on, Wow, Right, Hmm, Interesting, Really? Seriously?*) that deepen a conversation? How do we “score” a thoughtful response that meanders and repeats? Every utterance has a purpose, and it is up to the assessor (and the listener) to figure out what it is *and* its value to the conversation.

A third challenge is maintaining high validity. High validity means accurately assessing what you want to assess. What can we see and hear in a conversation that shows the learning we want to see? How do we evaluate the quality of a turn, a paraphrase, or a counterargument? What does it look like when students learn well? Or when they don’t learn well? These questions are important to consider as we assess with conversations.

* A final challenge is that conversations can last days, months, and years. That is, the slice of conversation we see today might be a continuation of many other slices on the same topic during the year. These conversations might be between two people or between one student and different partners throughout the year. We often don’t know what came before, at school, at home, or somewhere else. We must do what we can to understand students’ thinking based on the slice that we observe. Imagine watching just two minutes of a two-hour movie you have never seen. Those two minutes are all you get in order to evaluate the movie’s plot, acting, message, and quality.

And yet, despite all the challenges, we can notice strengths and weaknesses in conversations that help us to identify what we need to work on in our teaching. This chapter offers ideas for both formative and summative assessment of conversation as well as ideas for using conversation to assess reading, writing, and content understandings. Given that conversation-based assessments will tend to be short and focus only on one or two ideas, we focus on making every second count.

What Do We Want to Assess with Conversations?

Conversations are useful for assessing how students use the knowledge they have learned as they think with others to negotiate and construct ideas. Several dimensions of learning that are worthy of assessing with conversations are described in the following sections.

Core Content Standards and Essential Understandings

Conversations can be powerful ways to see content understandings or holes in students' understandings. You can see the big ideas in a properly designed conversation assessment. For example, students might be able to define the term *historical bias* on a test, but they might not be able to apply it or explain it in more realistic situations, as suggested by the following conversation about a recent protest described on the news. Guess who scored higher on the test.

- Nellie:* Did you hear what happened yesterday? The rallies with the people holding racist signs.
- Ron:* Yeah, they shouldn't allow those meetings.
- Nellie:* What do you mean?
- Ron:* They are supporting racism by bringing those signs. It'll get violent.
- Nellie:* But this is a democracy. Meetings are allowed. And what if it is just a few people? Maybe they are even people there who are holding signs to sabotage the meetings and make them all look racist.
- Ron:* It doesn't matter. It's on TV and it shows those people. The meeting leaders aren't kicking them out.
- Nellie:* But TV doesn't show everything. Just what they want us to see. Kinda like what we saw about winners of wars writing history to make themselves look good.
- Ron:* This isn't history. This was yesterday. And with all the news and photos and Internet these days, things are less biased than back then. It's harder to lie.
- Nellie:* Are you serious? The Internet has more bias and hate and lies than anywhere!
- Ron:* Only if you don't know where to look.
- Nellie:* Whatever.

The end of this conversation wasn't very academic, but it showed that Nellie, who didn't score well on the test, could adeptly apply her knowledge to a real topic. Ron, like many students, scored well on the test but failed to use his learning beyond the exam (at least in this conversation).

Thinking Skills

In preceding chapters we provide samples of conversations with higher-order thinking. In the rubrics in this chapter and in previous chapters, the first row includes the discipline's key thinking

skills and their language (see “Think and talk...” row in Figure 9.2, for example). It is important to be familiar with the thinking skills and language that students need to use to read the texts, do well on tests, write essays, perform labs, and show their learning of objectives. (For more ideas of assessments based on thinking skills, refer to the chart titled “Conversation-Worthy Performance Tasks by Discipline” in the appendix.)

It is important to assess the ability to transfer skills and ideas from one area or discipline to a new situation. For example, can a student transfer reasoning strategies learned in language arts to debate a topic in history? Can a student transfer the skill of balancing equations in math from the beginning of the year to solve a problem in science at the end of the year? Can a student transfer the use of perspective developed in history class to write a character analysis in language arts? Can a student use skills learned at school out in the real world? We can ask many similar questions, most of which involve transfer across time and across subject areas, a notion that defies the highly compartmentalized approach that says, “They got 80 percent on the last test and therefore they learned it—time to move on.” Yet it is this transfer, retention, extension, and real-world application that the future will require of our students.

Academic Language: Turning Language Demands into Language Objectives

Academic language is the lifeblood of success in school. Most of the tasks, texts, and tests in school use and require language that students tend not to encounter in home and social settings. The matrix in Figure 10.3 helps a teacher identify the academic language demands of learning activities and assessments. The first step is clarifying the content objective(s) for the unit or lesson(s). In the first column are four core dimensions of a lesson: assessments; teacher modeling, lectures, and directions; texts; and activities and tasks. Think about the specific parts of the lesson that might be linguistically challenging for students and describe the challenges in the second column. Parts might be quizzes, lectures, or group projects, and the language challenge might be a function, thinking skill, or communication issue. For example, a quiz might ask students to empathize with a historical character.

Figure 10.3 Language Demands and Objectives Planning Table

Lesson's Content Objective(s): <i>Students will be able to compare the positive and negative outcomes of industrialization and argue for one side over the other.</i>		
Lesson Dimension	Linguistically Challenging Part (and its thinking and communication skills that students will need to use to learn and to show learning)	Language Needed for Thinking and Showing Thinking (e.g., text organization; abstract vocabulary; prosody; nominalization; syntax: subject-verb agreement, pronouns, gerunds, adverbs, noun phrases, prepositions, participle phrases, verb tenses)

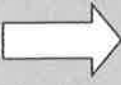


Assessments: <i>(formative assessments look at skills and knowledge needed for summative assessments, which are based on objectives)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exit ticket asks students to provide evidence for opinions and see both sides of an issue. - Think-pair-share requires students to persuade partner - Need to soften "all or nothing" comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use transitions such as <i>although, despite, so that, and on the other hand</i> to start clauses. - Opinion terms : Support your opinion Based on the research that . . . Opponents argue that . . . - Use <i>qualifiers and hedges</i> to soften message, to show humility, and to question and propose.
Teacher modeling, lecture, and directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher modeling of choosing quotation and describing how well it supports an argument 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abstract support terms: Look for a quotation that supports . . . Decide which points weigh the most and offer the strongest support. Explain how the quotation supports your point.
Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Long sentences in the chapter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Complex sentences that start with embedded clauses: "Given that the studies were done so long ago, <i>they</i> . . ." "Seeking to <i>hide</i> the truth from the world, <i>they</i> proceeded to . . ."
Lesson activities and tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students choose and evaluate supporting quotations - Students explain how quotations support either side of the issue; they compare quotations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use concession and rebuttal language: Granted, it is true that . . . , but . . . We concede that the benefits of . . . , yet . . . In spite of the big short-term gains, we must consider . . .
Language Objective(s): Students will explain how quotations strengthen a side of an issue by using example expressions and abstract vocabulary such as <i>support, weigh, issue, given that, strengthen, evaluate, and point</i> .		
Assessment of language objective(s): Exit ticket with rubric; academic conversation; persuasive essay		

In the third column, identify specific types of academic language that students will need to be successful in the things described in the second column. Identify the most important language needed to support the content objective(s) and use it to create language objectives. Use a format that includes what students will do and what language they will use to accomplish it. The needed language might be a type of grammar and/or specific terms (see the top right box of Figure 10.3 for more ideas.) For example, you might come up with the following language objective: "Students will support opinions by using complete sentences and transitions of example (*for example, for instance, etc.*)."

As you teach, you emphasize this language in mini-lessons that prepare students for academic conversations and other tasks, texts, and tests. Eventually, the process of filling in this table to identify key language should become automatic—and less time consuming.

You can use a rubric to assess the types of grammar a student is using when conversing. (See Chapter 6 for more detailed descriptions of academic grammar.) You can make a simple rubric or checklist, like the one in Figure 10.4, that focuses on the grammar you would like to hear. Give mini-lessons beforehand, and have students score oral messages that you model so that they see what they are supposed to do. Then have students practice in pairs with an observer. They can peer- and self-assess.

Figure 10.4 Sample Rubric for Assessing Grammar During Academic Conversations




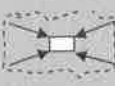

	<i>At or Above (3)</i>	<i>Approaching (2)</i>	<i>Below (1)</i>
	Uses varied academic transitions appropriately (<i>however, in addition, therefore</i>).	Shows some use of simple transitions such as <i>so, and, and but</i> .	Uses few or no transitions.
	Avoids universal statements; uses hedges and softens opinions (<i>likely, most, could, might, possible</i>).	Shows some use of hedges and some universal statements.	Uses few or no hedges; uses many all-or-nothing statements.
	Does not overly assume that the audience follows use of pronouns. Pronoun use is clear.	Some unexplained pronouns create confusion.	Overuses pronouns such as <i>it, this, that, and he</i> without referencing, which causes much confusion.

Academic Communication Skills and Behaviors

One of the most important dimensions of learning that we need to assess is the set of academic communication skills and behaviors emphasized in this book. These are often neglected in schools

that favor the focus on more test-focused snippets of knowledge and isolated skills. The ability to use different skills and tools to communicate and negotiate ideas is paramount. The rubric in Figure 10.5 (which you may recognize from Figure 7.3) includes these objectives in rows 2 through 5.

Figure 10.5 Sample Academic Conversation Rubric for Language Arts

	<i>At or Above (3)</i>	<i>Approaching (2)</i>	<i>Below (1)</i>
	(T) Think and talk like literature experts. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interpret themes and apply them to life. - Connect to characters and other texts. - Critique texts and author techniques. - Use literature terms and complex syntax. 	Make some connections, use some complex sentences and literature terms, and show some deep thinking.	Use short sentences and only social language (slang), make few connections, and take on few perspectives.
	(F) Stay focused. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Build on comments. - Connect ideas to topic well. - Negotiate conflicting ideas and word meanings. - Offer few, if any, tangential thoughts. 	Stay mostly on topic; show some idea building and negotiation; go on some tangents and deviations; show some confusion.	Rarely connect or build on ideas; go on many tangents and give unrelated information; demonstrate no negotiation of differing ideas.
	(S) Support ideas and opinions with examples from text, life, and previous lessons; clearly explain and elaborate on ideas.	Offer some prompting for and support of ideas with examples and clarifications.	Offer little or no support of ideas and reasons; show lack of appropriate prompting.
	(P) Paraphrase partner ideas to clarify, deepen, and stay focused; synthesize key points or steps at end.	Offer some paraphrasing and synthesizing of key points or steps.	Offer little or no paraphrasing and synthesizing.
	(C) Use communication behaviors; actively listen (eyes and body); take turns; value partner comments; be respectful.	Show some appropriate listening and turn-taking behaviors.	Show little eye contact or listening; interrupt; dominate talk or do not contribute at all.

Academic Conversation Rubrics

Put the features that you want to assess into a rubric, and clarify for students what the terms mean and how to get a high score. You can modify the rubrics to suit the needs of your students. All rubrics in this book are similar after the first row, which focuses on the thinking and academic language of that particular discipline.

The rubrics throughout this book are meant to offer ideas that you can use to create your own rubrics with your students. We encourage you to work with students to decide on the icons, the thinking skills, and the language of the rubrics. You can also turn a rubric into a self- or peer-assessment checklist.

Summative Academic Conversation Assessment

An end-of-unit or end-of-term academic conversation assessment (ACA) can help you take an in-depth look at what students have learned. Students often get interested in things that aren't emphasized on traditional tests. And many students don't like to write or give oral presentations. However, many students like to talk, and ACA offers the chance for them to show what they know and are thinking about through conversation. Conversation offers students some choice in showing what they have learned.

An ACA can augment existing performance-based assessments and more traditional tests. Hopefully, you are already using real-world-esque summative, performance-based assessments that motivate students and let them show what they can do with the new content, language, and skills that they have learned. In the left-hand column of Figure 10.6 are a few examples of summative assessments that you might already be using. In the right-hand column are conversation prompt ideas that would complement the assessments on the left.

Academic Conversation Assessment Procedure

Academic Conversation Assessments are just academic conversations that are assessed. The teacher observes two students as they converse about a topic. Other students might be conversing or doing other work at the time. It generally takes three days to complete the ACAs with all students in one class. Here is the basic procedure:

1. *Rubric.* Students should be very familiar with the rubric. Throughout the unit, go over the AC rubric for your discipline (kid friendly or other) with students and give examples of responses that score well. Put on a fishbowl conversation and have students score it with the rubric.

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Figure 10.6 Product-Based and Performance-Based Summative Assessments That Involve Conversation

Summative Assessment	Possible Prompts for Academic Conversation Assessment
Debate	Discuss the details of the issue, state your opinions, and negotiate a conclusion.
Panel Discussion/Talk Show	Practice being an audience member and panel member who disagree on the topic.
Historical Fiction Piece, Movie Script, Short Novel, or Children's Book	Be two coauthors of a historical fiction story for younger students. Plan what to include and not to include. Cowrite a sequel to the story/novel that we just read.
Editorial Letter	Consider two different sides of the topic and decide which side you agree with. Plan the organization of the letter.
Literature Analysis Essay	Be two literary critics and discuss the interpretation of the author's work.
Dialogue Between Two Characters	Be two actors or directors and discuss the next scene of a movie, book, or play; write the dialogue; and practice it.
Lab Experiment	Before or after the lab, discuss the purpose of the lab, the variables, the hypothesized results, and the possible practical applications. After the lab, discuss the results and conclusions.
Math Test	Be two business owners who write a math test with real-world examples for potential employees.
Public Service Advertisement	Be two citizens who identify local problems, argue which one is most urgent, and design an advertisement.
Museum Exhibit	Be two museum curators who create an exhibit for the current unit of study. Discuss and write up short descriptions and floor plans.
Informational Poster/Mural	Decide on several key points from the topic or text and negotiate the clearest visual way for an audience to remember the points.
Magazine/Newspaper (past or present)	Be two editors who outline a magazine or newspaper. Decide the sections, articles, and columns to include; then outline the lead article together.

2. *Topic/Prompt.* As you work with students to prepare for their ACA, emphasize that the topics of conversation should be new (something learned from the current unit), usable in other units and in the future, interesting, important, and challenging. You can generate a list of topics and themes during a whole-class session and then edit it to focus on the essential understandings and skills you would like to highlight or ones that don't show up on other assessments.
3. *Practice.* Have pairs choose a topic or prompt and prepare notes. They then should practice their conversation and self-assess it, using the rubric.
4. *Observation.* Choose a pair that is ready, and remind them of the rubric skills that you are looking for; you might even emphasize one or two, depending on the students. Have them converse about their topic; encourage them to focus on each other and try not to use notes. Take notes on the rubric (you can add two columns on the right side of the rubric, one for each student).
5. *Written synthesis.* Have students synthesize their conversation orally first, then work together to write a paragraph or two that synthesizes their conversation. They should recall key points, disagreements, negotiations, and so on.

Scoring Academic Conversations

Most likely, you will not have time to code each line of a pair's conversation, and you will have even less time to record and transcribe conversations. But you can get a sense of how to listen for thinking, language, and content understandings by looking at some sample scorings (see Figures 10.7, 10.8, and 10.9). The codes are from the rubric in Figure 10.5: T (think/talk), F (focus/build/connect), S (support with examples), P (paraphrase and synthesize), C (communication behaviors). As in the rubric, a 1 is for below the standard, 2 is for approaching the standard, and 3 is for at or above the standard.

Figure 10.7 Sample Language Arts Conversations with Scores (Fifth Grade)

		Maria	Alex
1	Alex: What did you notice about human nature in the story?		T3
2	Maria: I noticed that the man wasn't happy in the end. People hated him. He had money but not friends.	T3	
3	Alex: Can you elaborate on the part about people and money?		S3

4	Maria: Well, you know, people are more important than money because we need them more. Lots of poor people are happy.	S1	
5	Alex: I agree. Like in the story the man got a lot of money but lost all his friends along the way. I mean, we need money, but we also need friends to spend time with.		T3, F3, S3
6	Maria: And laugh with and talk with. Like, I need to talk with my friends all the time. Yesterday we talked a lot. You couldn't pay me enough to get rid of my friends.	T1, F1, S2	
7	Alex: What do you talk about?		F2, S2
8	Maria: Things you wouldn't understand (both laugh). School and stuff. Now, back to the idea of friends and people. They, like, are more important than money because, well, we get bored without others. There's poor people who are happy 'cause they spend time with friends and laugh.	F3, S2, T2	
9	Alex: So you are saying that others can make us happy, even if we are poor, right?		P3
10	Maria: Yes, well, I don't know. But people are important.	P3	
<i>Overall Communication (based on observation)</i>		C3	C2

Figure 10.8 Sample History Conversation with Scores (Tenth Grade)

		David	Mei
1	David: What was the most important result of the Civil War?	F3	
2	Mei: I think it was the United States staying unified. One nation.		T2
3	David: Why was that so important?	F3	
4	Mei: Because if it split up, then it would have been weak. Maybe not been able to defend themselves in future wars.		S2

Figure 10.8 Sample History Conversation with Scores (Tenth Grade) (continued)

		David	Mei
5	David: Like which?	S3	
6	Mei: Like against England and France, who I think still wanted to take over; and maybe even World War I and II. Who knows?		S3
7	David: Good point. But I think the most important effect was the end of slavery. We might still have slavery if they hadn't fought it.	T3, S3	
8	Mei: Why is that more important than the nation staying together?		F3
9	David: There were millions of slaves, treated worse than animals. Imagine if that were you. Would you care if the nation were divided? You would just care about freedom. The Pilgrims started the country on freedom, and the Constitution talked about it too.	S3, F3	
10	Mei: I guess it depends on your perspective. Maybe both made the country stronger. Freedom encouraged people to work hard, and then lots of people immigrated.		T3, S2, F3
11	David: Or did slavery make the country stronger? There was lots of free labor. We will never know. Anyway, I think both were important, too.	S3, P2	
12	Mei: So we can say that the union—unification—was important for military and economic reasons. And the abolishment of slavery was important for human freedom reasons.		F3, P3
<i>Overall Communication (based on observation)</i>		C2	C3

Figure 10.9 Sample Biology Conversation with Scores (Fourth Grade)

		Ken	Julia
1	Julia: I hate bats, but what would happen if a disease killed all the bats in this ecosystem?		T3

2	Ken: I hate them, too. One time I saw one by my house, and it freaked me out. I threw rocks at it.	T1, S1, F1	
3	Julia: Okay, but what about my question? What would happen?		F3
4	Ken: Well, they wouldn't be around to scare us and eat up all the bugs, I guess. I don't like bugs either.	S2	
5	Julia: I agree. But, do you think it would have an effect on the ecosystem?		T3, F3
6	Ken: Um. Well, I think it would be weird not to have them around. Maybe we'd have more bugs.	T2, S3	
7	Julia: So are you saying that there would be more insects because the bats wouldn't be around to eat them?		P3
8	Ken: Yes. I think we need bats to eat the bugs. If something happened to bats, we would probably have too many bugs, and that could cause problems because bugs eat stuff too.	T3	
9	Julia: I agree with your ideas, and I would add that we might have more people getting sick because some insects carry diseases. So, can we say that our hypothesis is that if the bats decreased, then the insects would increase?		T3, P3
10	Ken: Yes, and if the insects increased, we might get sick or other bad things might happen to our environment.	P3	
<i>Overall Communication (based on observation)</i>		C2	C3

This type of scoring is highly subjective, and the scores are not meant to be added up. These examples are meant to give you a rough picture of the types of responses that score high and low, and to offer feedback to students. For example, you might tell Ken that on several occasions, he went off on a tangent and didn't focus on the conversation topic. You might tell Julia how much you valued her skills of focusing the conversation on the topic. You can gather some excerpts from your class, or even have students write them down, to practice scoring them. Eventually, you will be able to listen for high-scoring and low-scoring moves that students make as they converse.

Teacher-Student Conversation Assessment

In addition to observing conversations between students, you can also engage in a one-on-one conversation with a student and get an even better understanding of what the student is learning and thinking. In a teacher-student conversation, you don't just ask questions; instead, you engage in conversation, sharing some of your thoughts about the topic as well. The trick is to encourage students to take the lead in the conversation. You can ask "wonder" questions or ask the student to elaborate and give examples, and so on. The student can choose the prompt and help to keep the conversation focused. You should also share some examples from your life, your interests, and your wonderings. Here is an excerpt from an eighth-grade history teacher-student conversation:

- 1 *Student:* So, I was wondering why they left lots of people out of the *Declaration of Independence*. It said that all men were created equal, but what about slaves?
- 2 *Teacher:* Good question. I wonder that, too. I think Jefferson had slaves, and he wrote that line.
- 3 *Student:* So what did "all" mean to them? I think they didn't think of slaves as human; but more like animals.
- 4 *Teacher:* Can you elaborate on that idea?
- 5 *Student:* Well, they made them work like animals for just food. They chained them up and punished them. They didn't have rights for life, liberty, and happiness, if you ask me.
- 6 *Teacher:* Or what about if they knew they were human, but the owners' selfish and greedy side won them over?
- 7 *Student:* So you think they believed the idea of all men are equal, but they didn't want to lose money from it? I think people are like that today.
- 8 *Teacher:* How so?
- 9 *Student:* Well, like politicians say a lot of things to get them elected, but it usually doesn't happen. For example, they say all people should have jobs, have health care, but it doesn't happen. I think, like you said, their greed wins over. Because big businesses are putting pressure on them, they wimp out.
- 10 *Teacher:* So, what should we conclude?
- 11 *Student:* So maybe both are true? Some saw slaves as not human and others looked the other way because of greed.

This student successfully used these conversation skills: initiating with an interesting prompt (line 1), probing and elaborating (lines 3, 5), paraphrasing (7), providing supporting examples (9), connecting ideas and staying focused (9), and synthesizing (11). The student used some hedging (*maybe* in line 11) and complex vocabulary (*rights, greed*) and grammar (clause starting with *because*). As this example shows, it is important to tell students the types of thinking and

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language you would like to hear in their conversation and then let students practice such conversations with one another (and/or with you) before the final assessment.

Formative Assessment and Feedback

Formative assessment informs the teacher and the students of what students have learned and where to go next. Before students are assessed with the more summative ACA just described, they need to practice conversing about a wide range of topics with different partners. Throughout a unit, you can formatively assess and provide feedback to hone their skills. A formative assessment might be a short pair-share or a practice conversation for their final ACA. Students need to prepare for their ACAs. But they also can be assessed during any conversation they have throughout a unit.

Students should constantly be aware of the ideas, skills, and language you are looking for in a good academic conversation. A chart like the one in Figure 10.10 can remind you and your students what to look for and do during conversations. You can share this form with students after conversations by using a document camera, interactive whiteboard, or overhead projector.

Figure 10.10 Conversation Skills and Thinking Skills with Student Language Samples

Conversation Skill	Student Comments	Thinking Skill	Student Comments
Elaborate, clarify	<i>It means that she probably lied because of all she had to gain by saying that he left.</i>	Interpret	<i>I think that the story was about the problem of being full of pride, stuck up.</i>
Support ideas with examples and evidence	<i>For example, I had to move from my village to the big city. I was also excited but worried.</i>	Persuade	<i>Many might argue that we should allow the market to decide, but research has shown that we should . . .</i>
Focus and build on ideas	<i>Related to Silvia's point about the changes in the fruit fly, I think it is a result of . . .</i>	Empathize; see other perspectives	<i>If I were in her shoes, I would go talk to the official and demand the money back.</i>
Paraphrase	<i>So, you think that we should not have gone to war; that the evidence of weapons was not strong enough.</i>	Infer cause and effect	<i>Watching his siblings suffer led him to start that movement.</i>

Figure 10.10 Conversation Skills and Thinking Skills with Student Language Samples (continued)

Conversation Skill	Student Comments	Thinking Skill	Student Comments
Synthesize	<i>I think that King Arthur was based on a real person but the magic stuff was made up.</i>	Problem solve	<i>What is the main issue between the two groups of people? What are possible solutions?</i>
Ask probing questions	<i>What does that expression mean these days?</i>	Evaluate	<i>How much money is one person's life worth? It is like comparing apples and oranges.</i>

You can use more abridged versions of the chart in Figure 10.10 to record the academic language used in student conversations. You can generate the chart's categories by considering what you want students to think about and meanings you want them to construct. It helps to think about the language you would hear if you had a conversation with a highly verbal student who had learned the material very well. As you look at the overall picture of student language, you will notice areas worthy of mini-lessons and other areas worthy of celebration. You might notice a lack of evidence, lack of synthesis, exceptional elaboration, and so on.

After analyzing close to 8,000 studies, Hattie (1992) wrote, "The most powerful single modification that enhances achievement is feedback. The simplest prescription for improving education must be 'dollops of feedback'" (9). So, how can you provide feedback as you listen to students talk and construct meaning?

The first dimension of conversation feedback is helping students with the clarity of their messages. You might, for example, explain to a student how and why his or her comparisons weren't clear. The second dimension of feedback is clarifying what students should keep doing and/or what they should change (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock 2001). You might tell the student that he or she should use transition words such as *on the other hand* or *however* when comparing ideas to make the differences clear. Conversation feedback should be immediate, specific to student utterances, focused, not overloaded with information or things to think about, and nonevaluative. Feedback should assume students will have other opportunities to use the revised language. Feedback should model target language such as *I liked how you supported your opinion with specific parts of the text and examples from your life*. This is one way to model academic language—language that has meaning to that student in the moment.

Observing and providing feedback on conversations allows teachers to be supportive coaches who listen to what students are thinking. Such an environment with helpful and encouraging

feedback emphasizes that students don't have to learn everything today for tomorrow's test—that many important things in life are learned over time, negotiated, argued, shared, mulled over. Students should get multiple chances to learn as much as they can. Each step along the way, teachers are there to scaffold students' thinking and model the work of the discipline.

During conversations, you can gather language data on a chart like the one in Figure 10.10. You can use it to provide specific feedback to students about their conversation skills and other learnings. For example, you might respond to a science student with, "Well done, Luís! When you talked about what you thought would happen to the solution, you used your background knowledge of bonding to hypothesize what will happen when we add the acid." In history you might comment, "Interesting interpretation of this person's motives to pass this bill. You used what you know about the person's past to see his perspective." In language arts, "I heard you say that the author wrote the poem to teach us about fear and love. And then you gave examples from life. Well done." You cannot provide such feedback every day to every student, but these moments make a world of difference over time.

Several strategies for helping you to assess and provide feedback during conversations follow.



Converse About a Practice Quiz/Test

In this formative assessment and instructional activity, give each partner half of the practice quiz questions. The asker reads each question aloud. When a partner answers a question, the asker makes sure the answer is complete. The asker can probe for elaboration and examples. Mini-conversations can begin when two partners need to negotiate meaning, define terms, and clarify on more open-ended prompts. The asker can also evaluate and score the response, justify the score to the partner, and then take a turn answering a question. You can also provide answers to guide the asker. When the asker helps (provides the answer), he or she should not read it out loud. It needs to be covered up and explained in the asker's own words.



Paired Paragraphs

Rather than doing individual quickwrites, students pair up and talk about what they learned in class and then put it on paper together. They have to negotiate meanings and write a coherent synopsis of the learning of the day. You can go around and assess their conversations as they work, and you can assess their writing products afterward.

You might give directions like these: *You and your partner will use your conversation's ideas to write a seven-minute paragraph composed of five to eight sentences, with a topic sentence, key details, and evidence. Use at least two complex sentences. For example, . . . And use at least three key vocabulary terms. You will peer-edit this paragraph with another pair after seven minutes.*



Written Controversy Conversations

Two partners can write their conversation in two different colors on the same piece of paper. This allows you to see what each partner wrote to provide feedback. This also allows you to have all students “conversing” at once and then evaluate their conversation skills and content learnings on paper later. Some teachers even share some of the conversations as models.

A variation is having partners create a written conversation about a controversy (e.g., cell phones at school, social networking sites, legalization of drugs, cloning, etc.). Each person tries to convince the other person to take his or her side. Students should do some reading on the topic and use ideas from them in their written conversations. You can also assign students to take different sides of the issue.



Paired Cloze

In this activity, both students work together to fill in a cloze passage. They negotiate the words they think are most appropriate for each blank. The use language such as *This term is more appropriate because it describes . . .* They should also use examples from the text and other lessons to help them choose the best words.



Podcasts

Students converse to prepare an audio podcast on a topic of interest to the world. They might make up a speech, a dramatic conversation, a critique of a book or movie, an editorial, a monologue, or an interview. They can also prepare a conversation to be recorded.

Student Self-Assessment

Students can self-monitor their conversations using checklists (see Figures 10.11 and 10.12) and rubrics based on those found in this and other chapters. Students can fill in their self-assessments individually or in pairs.

Here are some additional prompts that students can respond to after their conversations.

- Give an example of an idea you learned from the conversation that you probably would not have learned by yourself.
- How did your conversation help you learn the ideas?
- What did you notice about yourself as a learner?
- Suggest a change that you and your partner could make to have a better conversation next time.
- Did you both talk about the same amount?

Figure 10.11 Self-Assessment Checklist for Conversation Work


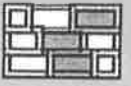

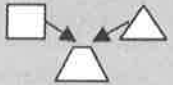


<i>In our paired conversation, how often did I/we . . .</i>			
Symbol	Conversation Skill	Scale	Comments
	Stay focused on an important topic?	Rarely Sometimes Often	
	Build on each other's ideas?	Rarely Sometimes Often	
X X X X 	Support big ideas and opinions with examples or evidence?	Rarely Sometimes Often	
	Negotiate an idea (respectfully), when we disagreed?	Rarely Sometimes Often	
	Maintain good eye contact and use good conversational body language?	Rarely Sometimes Often	
	Choose the most academic ways of talking? (vocabulary, mortar terms, long sentences)	Rarely Sometimes Often	

Figure 10.12 Alternative Self-Assessment Checklist for Conversation Work












Observed	Conversation Moves
	Prompt partner to share
	Have equal talking time
	Elaborate on ideas
	Provide examples
	Build on partner's ideas
	Paraphrase ideas
	Summarize conversation

Figure 10.12 Alternative Self-Assessment Checklist for Conversation Work (continued)

Observed		Conversation Body Language
		Face partner
		Use eye contact
		Lean forward
		Use gestures and nod
Compliments and Suggestions:		

Peer Feedback

At times it is helpful to have a third student assess a paired conversation and provide feedback. The third student can use a class-developed checklist, similar to those in Figures 10.11 and 10.12. The observer takes notes and provides constructive feedback after the conversation. Before providing feedback, the observer lets the two partners reflect on how they think the conversation went. See a sample checklist in Figure 10.13.

Figure 10.13 Sample Checklist for Monitoring Conversations

Productive Behaviors	Notes	Nonproductive Behaviors	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives reasons and evidence for opinions • Uses academic expressions • Politely disagrees • Asks helpful and thoughtful questions • Leads the group toward a goal 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interrupts others • Makes fun of others' comments or dismisses them • Distracts others • Does not listen • Takes discussion off topic • Dominates the discussion 	

Assess Sentence Length and Complexity

You know that many students talk plenty. But many others don't talk enough, and having them work toward more talk, especially academic discourse, is needed. Some students, for example, might speak long utterances with many simple sentences. They need to learn how to use clauses and combine sentences as they converse. One strategy, described in Chapter 6, is to increase the length of students' sentences, which increases their complexity and cognitive load. Using oral and written samples, you can calculate the mathematical mean of the length of each sentence.

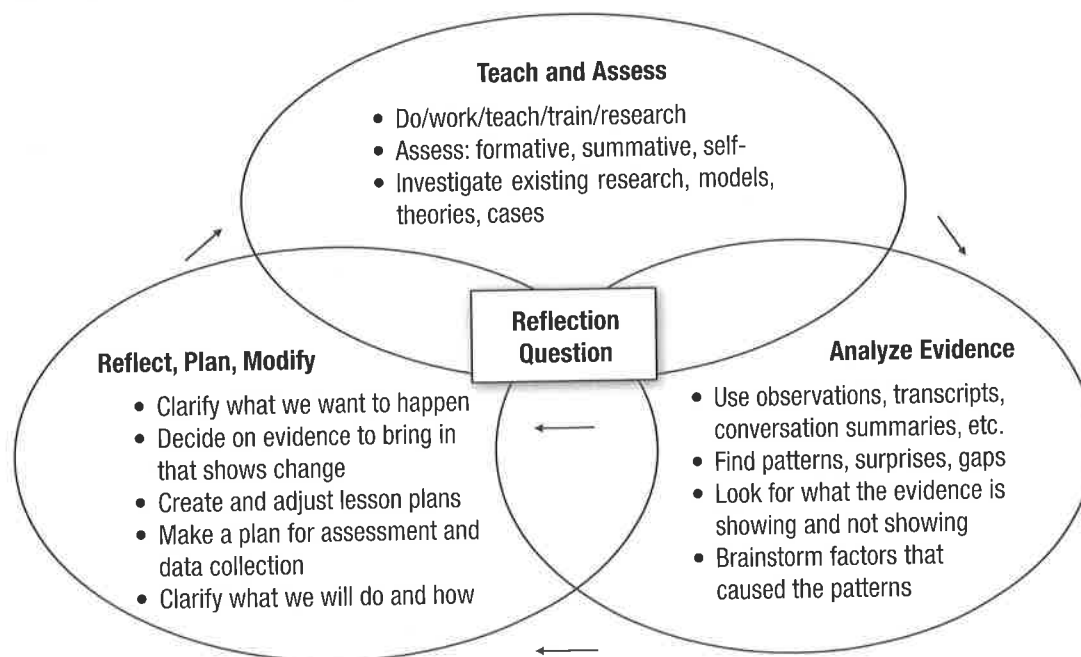
You can then have students listen and read longer and longer sentences during the year, and you can challenge them to produce them in writing and in conversations. The better students are at listening to and processing long sentences with multiple clauses and phrases, the better they can understand complex texts and messages.

Evaluating and Improving the Effectiveness of Academic Conversations

Intuitively, we all might see the value of academic conversations. But we also need to see (and hear) significant results in order to continue using them and in order to modify how we use them. Teaching students to and through talk is highly complex and full of social, cultural, cognitive, curricular, and linguistic variables. We must be action researchers, engaged in a cycle of inquiry as we evaluate and improve our teaching.

A helpful model for action research is shown in Figure 10.14. The cycle revolves around a central question, such as *How can I use academic conversations to improve students' skills of supporting their ideas with evidence in their essays?* In the first stage, "Teach and Assess," you teach conversation skills and gather data on student progress. In the next stage, you analyze the evidence to see patterns and needs. Then in the last stage, you reflect on the evidence and adapt your teaching to bring about improvement. This cycle can be done individually or with a small team of teachers.

Figure 10.14 Reflective Inquiry Cycle



Assessments are not just destinations for learning—they are also vehicles. Assessments can teach. We owe it to students to make the thinking and language that we desire for them to learn as clear and explicit as possible. We also owe it to them to make the learning activities and assessments as aligned and engaging as possible. As we assess *we* must be advocates for students, rather than their judges (Tierney 1998). We must help and encourage students to challenge themselves to show what they know, to take risks, to help one another, and to push themselves to use new language and thinking skills.

Reflections

1. What should students in your classes know and be able to do in a conversation?
2. Why and how do real-world experts of your discipline talk?
3. Design a conversation prompt for a core concept that you teach, and then create a rubric for it. Include thinking and language criteria.
4. Choose a conversation skill, and design a mini-lesson that would help build the language and thinking skills needed for success on the assessment in reflection 3.
5. Describe three general principles that guide your philosophy of how students learn. How do these principles shape your teaching? Where can conversation fit in?
6. Hold a quick academic conversation with a teacher, friend, or student. Jot down some of the language and thinking used.